

AUGUST 9, 1984

We've been shipping lambs the past few days. By imposing on our neighbors, and playing the wind, we've once again pulled off a July sheep scattering exercise.

The crew has run from grade school kids to a range struck school teacher. Our counts have come up to an acceptable level. The lambs are weighing heavy and so far they've reached the scales without too big a shrink.

Cool weather is the secret in working sheep. July and August can be mild in the Shortgrass Country. In 1919, my grandfather hit a cool spell during one of his works that lasted three days, according to his records. My late father used to look back fondly on a 4th of July in either '28 or '29 that he said was like a fall day.

We sheep men have to learn to play the weather, or we go out of business. During my career of some 40 years, I've lambed at the right time twice and probably sheared on the correct schedule about a score over that figure.

It is wrong that woolie operators stay around their flocks so much that we get just like our sheep. Don't believe that. Sheep don't have bankers or charge accounts at feed stores. They weather drouths much better than their owners. Sheep are pretty reasonable animals. It's the folks that own them that are hard to explain.

On the second day of the work, the whole day was cool and cloudy. Once, while I was standing at the cutting gate, a draft of cold air surrounded me for a few seconds. After we'd worked off the corralful, I remembered how cold it was last winter. Somewhere a plumber or a would-be plumber must have been working on some pipes that were frozen last January and were just being repaired. Out in the pasture I still ride into pockets of pipe smoke, and it's been over three years since I've had my hands on a corn cob.

Across my tracks all over the country, there's probably pipe smoke floating around in the atmosphere. Those big cob foggers put out a huge volume of smoke. I've had to promise and re-promised myself several times that before my nostrils become too delicate to be close to smokers, I'd better call back those days when I kept a smoke screen going from Mertzon to the ranch that was often bad enough to look like a bank of bad weather moving in from the north.

Once the cold air disappeared, I began to wonder how old the dust was floating around those pens. I started helping work sheep there in 1936. I don't know how long dust lives, but I doubt if after it gets down here off the Texas Plains it goes very much farther. I know that a whirlwind can hold the same center for years without wearing out, but I don't believe I ever heard anyone say how long corral dust will last. I imagine it's a long time.

The cool weather and the young boys make a good combination. Sheep have bailed my family out of many a dry wreck. The time has come once again for these lowly animals to perform. Like their owners, they aren't so bad once you get used to them.